

Reproductive Health

"Sexual and reproductive health concerns everyone, everywhere, and at every stage of life."

Paul Van Look, Director,

World Health Organization/Reproductive Health and Research

What Is Reproductive Health?

There are many definitions, but generally, "reproductive health" covers all matters relating to the reproductive system, at all stages of life. Good reproductive health for women begins in childhood and the teen years. Things such as nutrition, environment, education, income level, and cultural practices influence your reproductive health.

Why Is It Important?

Good reproductive health benefits the health and well-being of you and your family. It can improve the social and economic situation of you and your family. And most importantly, it can help make sure that every infant is wanted, loved and has a chance to grow up healthy. Some of the things that make up good reproductive health include:

- Being able to protect yourself against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), including HIV/AIDS.
- Having healthy pregnancies and healthy babies.
- Having access to safe, effective, and affordable methods of birth control.
- Being able to space your pregnancies and avoid unintended pregnancies.

What are Unintended Pregnancies?

An unintended pregnancy is one that happens at the wrong time in your life or is unwanted at the time you got pregnant.

The usual reasons most people have an unintended pregnancy are:

- Not using any method of contraception.
- Not using your method the way you were told, like taking a pill every day.
- Not using your planned method, such as condoms or a diaphragm, every time you have sex.
- The method itself failed.

Why are Unintended Pregnancies a Problem?

In general, planned babies are healthier babies. Mothers, too, are less likely to suffer health and other problems if their pregnancies are planned. For many women, if a pregnancy is unexpected, they are more likely not to see a doctor early in pregnancy or not get prenatal care at all.

Starting prenatal care after you are three months along, or not seeing a doctor at all, is related to the baby being born too soon, or too small. Being born before nine months or weighing less than 5 ½ pounds can lead to many possible problems for the baby.

If your pregnancy is unplanned, you may be more likely to have a poor diet, including not getting enough folic acid, a vitamin that helps prevent certain birth defects. You may also have a lifestyle with health risks to you and your baby. Smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, using other drugs, or having unsafe sex can put your baby at risk for being born too early or too small, dying at birth or soon after, dying of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), and developing asthma and/or learning problems later in childhood.

Unplanned pregnancies can put you at more risk of becoming a victim of domestic violence. The child of an unplanned pregnancy is also at risk of abuse and neglect.

If you have an unplanned pregnancy, you are less likely to finish your education.

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Birth Spacing

Children born too close together are more likely to be born early, or small and underweight. Premature or too-small babies have a greater chance of becoming sick; some even die as a result. Researchers believe babies born close together are less healthy because the mother's body has not fully 'bounced back' from the previous pregnancy. Being pregnant and having a baby takes a toll on a woman's body. How long should you wait before having your next child? The healthiest babies are born to women who waited 18 to 23 months after giving birth before getting pregnant again. Using a family planning method helps you plan your pregnancies and control the amount of time between births.

Family Planning

The Choice Is Yours...Benefits of Family Planning

Family planning benefits the health and well-being of women and families throughout the world. Effective use of birth control methods can help young women avoid unplanned pregnancy and postpone childbirth. Contraceptive use between pregnancies can help ensure proper spacing between babies. And, for women who have reached their desired family size, birth control can help prevent unplanned pregnancy in later years. Family planning may also help you:

- Be able to prepare financially for your children.
- Have children when you want them.
- Have children further apart.
- Be healthier during pregnancy.
- Have a healthier baby.
- Have sex without worrying about an unplanned pregnancy.



The Tennessee Department of Health offers family planning services in every county health department clinic. Birth control services are provided on a sliding fee scale based on family size and income. Persons below the federal poverty level will not be charged for services. No one will be denied services due to inability to pay. Family planning services are available to anyone, male or female, who wants a method of birth control. All information is kept private. The clinics are staffed by doctors, nurse practitioners, and nurses. The staff are specially trained to provide education, counseling, physical assessments, medical histories, and contraceptives.

Services you will receive at your local family planning clinic

◆ Medical Services

- ◆ physical exams
- ◆ cervical cancer screening
- ◆ breast cancer screening
- ◆ STD testing and treatment
- ◆ Blood pressure screening
- ◆ anemia screening
- ◆ pregnancy testing
- ◆ dispensing of birth control methods
- ◆ emergency contraception
- ◆ sterilization referrals

◆ Education and Counseling Services

- ◆ Reproductive and preventive health
- ◆ Self breast/testicular examination
- ◆ Contraceptive methods
- ◆ STD/HIV

◆ Referrals and linkages with community resources

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The Choice Is Yours...Birth Control Methods

The choice of birth control depends on factors such as your health, how often you have sex, how many partners you have, and when you want to have children in the future. For more information talk to your doctor or call the local health department in your county.

Which Method Is Right For You?

Abstinence — Refraining from sexual intercourse.

Condoms (rubbers) — A thin sheath of latex rubber that fits over the penis and prevents sperm from getting inside the woman's vagina. Helps protect both partners from sexually transmitted diseases. Condoms are more effective if used with a spermicide. Some people experience irritation from the latex.

Contraceptive Patch — An adhesive patch that contains the same hormones as birth control pills is worn on the body for one week at a time. Three patches are used per month.

Contraceptive Vaginal Ring — A small soft ring that contains hormones is placed in the vagina to prevent the release of an egg from the ovary. A ring is worn for three weeks at a time.

Diaphragm (with spermicide) — A small round rubber cup which is placed in the vagina over the cervix and keeps sperm from entering the uterus. It must be used with a spermicidal jelly or cream. Some people experience irritation from the latex.

Injectables — A contraceptive shot is given once every 3 months. May cause changes in menstrual flow.

IUD (intrauterine device) — A small, soft plastic device, covered with copper or a hormonal agent, which is inserted into the uterus. Effective for 5 or 10 years, depending on the type.

Natural Family Planning — Avoiding sexual intercourse during the fertile days in a woman's cycle. Requires instruction from a health professional to determine the days of fertility.

Pills — Birth control pills contain hormones that work by preventing the release of an egg from the ovary each month. These must be taken daily.

Spermicidal Films, Foams, Creams, Suppositories, and Jellies — Chemicals which kill sperm and come in different forms. They are placed in the vagina just before intercourse. Some people may experience irritation from the spermicide.

Sterilization — Permanent method available to men and women who are absolutely sure they do not want children in the future. The male procedure is called a vasectomy and involves cutting and tying the tubes that carry sperm. The female procedure is called tubal ligation and involves cutting and tying the tubes which carry the egg.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

These diseases are the ones you can get by having sex (genital, oral, or anal) with someone who already has one of these infections. Many people do not know they have an STD because some common STDs cause no symptoms.

STDs can cause infertility (not being able to get pregnant when you want to). If you are already pregnant, STDs can cause miscarriage, tubal pregnancy, prematurity, stillbirth, birth defects, newborn illness, and death.

Some common STDs are chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital herpes, HIV, syphilis, and hepatitis B.

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How to protect yourself against sexually transmitted diseases

The surest way to avoid getting or giving any STD is to not have sexual contact, or to be in a long-term, faithful relationship with the same partner who has been tested and is known to not be infected with any STD. Latex condoms, when used every time and used correctly, are highly effective in preventing the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Latex condoms, when used every time and used correctly, can also reduce the spread of gonorrhea and chlamydia. Condoms are not as reliable in preventing the spread of genital herpes.

For more information or to make an appointment to be tested for an STD, call your doctor or your county health department.